

# Flexibility on the Missouri

Editorial  
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Upstream and downstream interests have reached a compromise in the U.S. Senate over the management of the Missouri River. Critics are calling it an end run around the Endangered Species Act. Even if they're accurate, that doesn't necessarily make it bad. The Endangered Species Act sometimes tilts too far to accommodate non-human needs without even considering the needs of humans.

At issue is a plan developed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. It would force the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to open the upstream dams to produce a "spring rise" in the Missouri between Sioux City and St. Louis. In late June the flow would be cut back, causing the river levels to drop. This would differ from the current practice of leaving the water levels higher during the summer to accommodate downstream boaters and barge transportation.

Biologists at Fish and Wildlife say the succession of high water and low water is required under the Endangered Species Act to help save two species of birds and one fish that are protected under the act. High water in the spring and low levels in the summer would encourage the species to reproduce more, the agency contends.

The Senate compromise brings together Democratic Majority Leader Tom Daschle of South Dakota and two Missouri senators, Kit Bond, a Republican, and Jean Carnahan, a Democrat. Their agreement, ratified by the full Senate, allows the Corps of Engineers to consider factors in addition to the Fish and Wildlife position.

Perhaps manipulating the river flows as recommended by Fish and Wildlife would be a good thing ecologically across the board. Perhaps it would, as some of Daschle's upstream constituents contend, be a good thing for recreation and tourism on portions of the river above Sioux City. Indeed, perhaps its negative effects seen by Bond's downstreamers - they say it would heighten the danger of downstream flooding as well as drastically curtailing barge traffic - would be as inconsequential as supporters of the plan argue.

But even if all that were true, there is something unbalanced about a decision-making process that is required by law to consider only the narrowest of concerns.

This is not to urge the hardening of hearts against the protected species in the Missouri - the least tern, the piping plover and the pallid sturgeon. The Environmental Protection Act is based on the sound philosophy that all creatures have a role in the web of life. If the environment becomes inhospitable for any one creature, for the most part it is less hospitable for all others.

Indeed, other fish populations in the Missouri have declined in recent years. Improving the river for an endangered creature such as the pallid sturgeon would presumably improve it for non-endangered carp, catfish, paddlefish and the many other species that make the Missouri their home.

Sometimes, unfortunately, things get a little shrill. An Associated Press account of the Senate compromise contained this sentence: "The changes are sought by the Fish and Wildlife Service, which says the current management has propelled two native bird species, the piping plover and least tern, and a fish, the pallid sturgeon, to the brink of extinction." (Emphasis added.) We doubt that Fish and Wildlife said it exactly that way, and we hope the public doesn't come to think of it in those terms. The two birds in question are found, although in distressingly small numbers, over a wide range including, in the case of the plover, the Great Lakes and the Atlantic Coast. The pallid sturgeon also inhabits the

Yellowstone and Mississippi Rivers. Conservation programs for all three creatures are in place over that wide area.

Accordingly, the current management of the Missouri doesn't deserve 100 percent of the blame for causing their populations to be low. And it doesn't carry 100 percent of the burden for saving them.

Neither does the Missouri River exist only for wildlife. Senator Daschle's constituents in South Dakota have irrigation and tourism expectations. In Nebraska, the Back to the River movement ties the improvement of the Missouri to a host of community-development and recreational innovations - including some restorations, such as the Boyer Chute, that biologists contend are making the Missouri ecology more hospitable to threatened and endangered wildlife. Farmers contend that having barges in the river keeps railroad grain-shipping rates from soaring.

Fortunately, the needs of man and wildlife can in many cases be compatible if the decision-making process provides for a sensible weighing of relevant facts. It seems to us that the Daschle-Bond compromise, now headed for a House-Senate conference committee, would be a step in that direction.